Travel

Travels through Crete's ancient history – without the crowds

Spring is the perfect season to take in the island's mountains, museums and fabled monuments

Alec Russell APRIL 29 2023

For half an hour or so, as we headed up the steepest part of Crete's Rouvas Gorge, the canyon's walls closed in on both sides. The only sound was the water splashing on the rocks from waterfalls above and beneath us. Birds wheeled overhead to impossibly remote cliff nests. But otherwise we had the gorge to ourselves. Even the goats whose bells we had heard around the monastic olive groves just above our starting point, Lake Zaros, seemed to have decided for now to keep to those lower slopes.

After scrambling over rocks and traversing the mountain stream, finally there we were on a plateau about 1,000m above sea level. In the foreground was the tiny chapel of St John, in the distance snow-capped Mount Ida, the highest of the mountains that dominate the Cretan landscape.

We were on day two of our early-April tour through several thousand years of Cretan history. It was easy to see how Ida has inspired so many over so many years. In a cave on these slopes, Greek myth had it that Zeus, king of the gods, was hidden away as a baby to keep him from his father Cronus, who wanted to kill him. Of rather more certainty is the story that unfolded here in April 1944, when the writer and then undercover military agent, Patrick Leigh Fermor, was also navigating Mount Ida. Masquerading as German soldiers, he and a fellow officer had, with the Cretan resistance, kidnapped the commander of the German garrison occupying the island. On the run, they and their prisoner spent a chill night in a cave. As dawn broke, Leigh Fermor was to recall, the general gazed at Mount Ida and started reciting in Latin the Horatian ode that opens with a moving image of a mountain north of Rome "glistening with deep snow".

Leigh Fermor picked up the thread and finished the ode. "The general's blue eyes had swivelled away from the mountain-top to mine," he later wrote. "And when I'd finished, after a long silence, he said: 'Ach so Herr Major.' It was very strange . . . As though, for a long moment, the war had ceased to exist . . . " (Nearly half a century later, I accompanied Leigh Fermor for a few days as he travelled through post-communist Romania; his powers of literary recall seemed undimmed.)

A lone hiker in Rouvas Gorge © Alamy

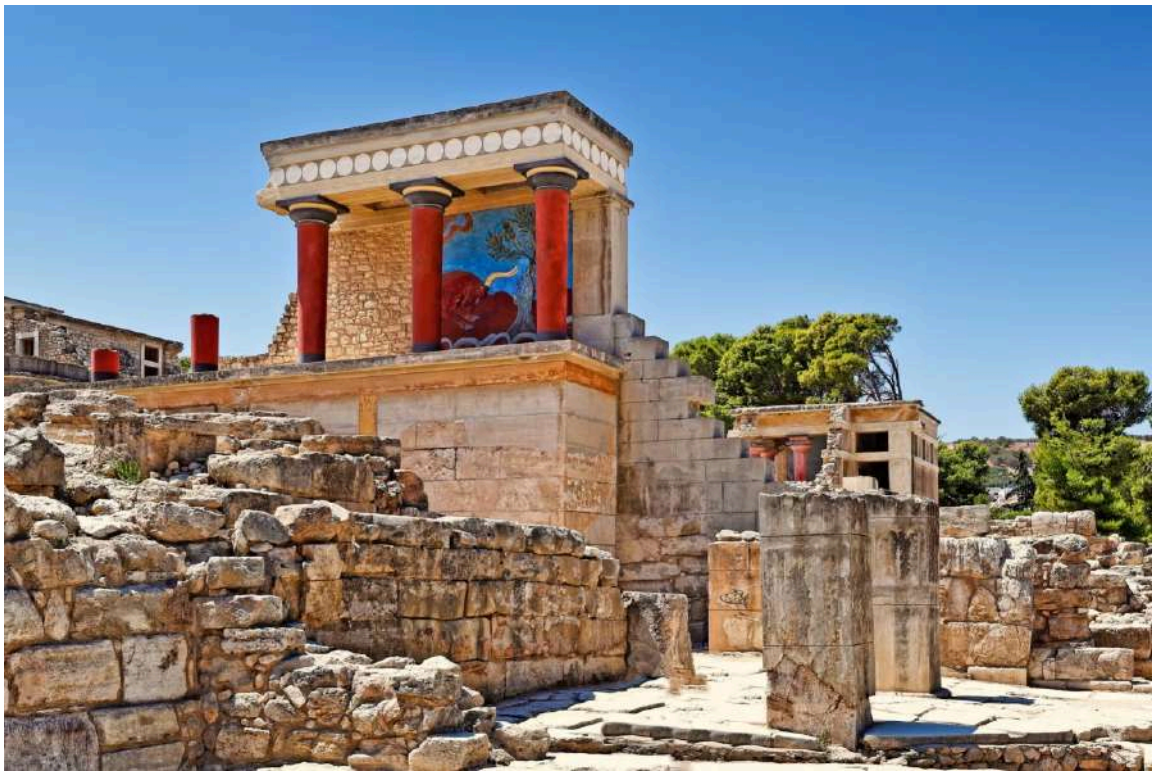
Spring flowers brighten the rocky hillsides © Getty Images/iStockphoto

Zaros Lake, south-west of Heraklion © Tagstiles/Dreamstime.com

The life story of Caspar Bichsel, our charming Swiss guide, almost embodies the spirit of that Horatian ode, written as advice to a young man to live for the moment. Caspar had visited Crete when working for a tech company, fallen in love with a Cretan, abandoned the corporate world, and is now a mountain guide. My wife and I sat with him at a rough-hewn table, surveying the craggy oak trees of a bulbous type peculiar to Crete, as he told us of the mountain caves that still yield 2,500-year-old pottery, of the unchanging patterns of life and landscape — but also of the damaging effect of rising temperatures on the quality of olive oil, for so long the viscous heart of the local economy.

The sun burnt off the early spring coolness for our descent. We took our time, savouring the spring flowers: the bright purple of the irises and cream of the lilies all the more striking against the rocky hillside. The smell of wild sage was eclipsed only once — by the pungency of the chamomile bushes fringing a hillside monastery. From start to finish it was a five-hour hike. An hour in the car and we were back in the ancient port of Heraklion, glasses of Cretan wine in hand, revelling in the bustling street life of the capital.

We were staying in a delightful boutique eco-hotel, Olive Green, overlooking one of the squares in the old city. It is five minutes' walk from the medieval Venetian harbour and the sea. It is also five minutes from the Heraklion Archaeological Museum, which houses one of the most important collections of antiquity in the world. Its exhibits testify to the splendour of the Minoan civilisation, the Bronze Age power that flourished on Crete more than 1,000 years before the heyday of classical Greece. In the summer, when hundreds of thousands of tourists flock to Crete's beaches from across Europe, the museum is crammed. At the start of the season, it was all but deserted. We could peer uninterrupted at the tiny golden frog with its eggs on its back, an exquisite testimony to the artistry of 2000BC; the pendant of two bees dropping honey into a honeycomb; the snake goddess figurines; the giant moulds used to ship in the ingots of copper for the bronzework.



The palace at Knossos, once the centre of Minoan civilisation © Alamy

Stunned, yet also primed, we drove 20 minutes inland to the fabled Knossos. In 2019 the ruins of the old Minoan capital had a million or so visitors. On the day of our visit, there were just a few dozen others. It reminded me of visiting the Pyramids in 2011, just after the Arab Spring, on our own. Except for the occasional squawk of peacocks, we walked in silence along streets laid out 4,000 years ago. Our guide painted a mesmerising picture, linking the exhibits we had seen earlier, the pendants, olive oil urns, funeral ornaments and frescoes, to the buildings before us.

We finished by sitting in the afternoon sun beside the "royal road" — the oldest known paved road in Europe, dating back to the third millennium BC — listening to our guide's appraisal of the myths, from the Minotaur to Daedalus, and his fair-minded assessment of Arthur Evans, the early 20th-century British excavator, who bought the site and unearthed the ruins. When we looked up, what could we see? Mount Ida "glistening with deep snow . . . "

On day three it was time to head west and inland. Our destination was the old monastery of Arkadi, known as the monastery of the bells and legendary in Crete for its role as the centre of a doomed uprising in the mid-19th century. At its heart is a stunning Venetian baroque church set in a courtyard with orange trees. When we arrived, the only signs of life were two cats snoozing in the sun.

There are just three monks now but in its pomp this was a thriving spiritual, intellectual and commercial centre. In November 1866, hundreds of Cretans, including women and children, were besieged here by an army of their Ottoman overlords intent on crushing what had become a stronghold of rebels seeking independence. When the attackers broke through the outer wall, those who had taken refuge in the gunpowder cellar blew themselves up rather than surrender. One of the old trees still bears a shard of shrapnel.

The Arkadi monastery, which was formerly a thriving spiritual and commercial centre. Now only three monks remain
© Alamy

We were staying a few winding miles away at the old stone village of Kapsaliana. For nearly 200 years from the mid-18th century, this was the home of the monastery's olive oil "factory" — a considerable enterprise. When it closed in 1955, the village fell into disrepair. There were only a handful of elderly people left in 1976, when Myron Toupoyannis, a renowned Cretan architect, came by. It was love at first sight.

"I started on one ruin and then another and then another," he told me of his project to buy the village from the monastery. "Then I bought the olive oil factory, a process which took years. And then in 1990 I bought the land around the village, which was very complicated . . . And then I thought we could do something."

The "something" is a quite remarkable renovation. Looking out over the Cretan Sea to the north, and overlooked by Mount Ida to the south, the village hotel that Toupoyannis has created encompasses much of the old community. To reach our cottage we climbed an outdoor stone staircase as if to a monastic cell. Across the paved village street was the old chamber where the olives were processed and which still houses the original massive stone olive press. We later learnt that the 30 women who used to come each autumn to pick the olives slept on the floor of our room. "The abbot who was in charge lived opposite," Toupoyannis told me. "He wasn't allowed to have any contact with women and he threw stones at your bedroom door to tell them when food was ready."

Kapsaliana is a haven. Tempting though it was to stay there and revel in the beauty and calm of its architecture and revived monastic orchards and gardens, it is also 15 minutes from Eleutherna, one of the most important historical discoveries of the late 20th century. It is here, in a secluded valley, that 35 years ago archaeologists had that astonishing experience of shedding light on a long forgotten period. In this case, it was the "dark ages" between 1200 and 900BC, between the Minoans and preclassical Greece.

Chania’s 14th-century harbour © Getty Images

A brightly coloured door in Margarites, a village famous for its ceramics . . . © Alamy

. . . and one of the little streets in Chania © Getty Images/EyeEm

When I studied ancient Greek history at university in the 1980s, little was known about this era beyond what could be hazarded from Homer. But now, thanks to the dig at Eleutherna, we have evidence substantiating Homer's accounts of funeral rites and more. Our polymathic guide, Yiannis Tzanoudakis, had introduced himself at the Arkadi monastery, insisting the best history is told with "equilibrium and balance". But even so, he — rightly — could barely contain himself as he showed us the Eleutherna Museum, the brainchild of Professor Nikolaos Stampolidis, who now presides over the Acropolis Museum in Athens. The Eleutherna Museum includes the contents of aristocratic burial chambers and the remains of funeral pyres that echo passages in the *Iliad*. "This is something amazing," Yiannis said. "This is Homer 100 per cent."

As we left the museum, a violent windstorm, blowing thick dust from north Africa, nearly knocked us off our feet. Homer was also right in stressing the force of the Cretan winds, observed Yiannis, pointing up at Mount Ida as it disappeared into the dust cloud. "I worry the snow will melt too soon because of the hot winter. It used to stay on the mountain until June, but not now."

After our long morning of history we headed to the nearby village of Margarites, famous for its potters, who still use the same materials and techniques as the Minoans. Following a bravura display, it was time for a slap-up Cretan lunch at the local taverna, and for me a large Mythos beer.

The pool at the Domes Zeen resort in Chania © George Kakaros Unique Imaging

Our last few days took us back to the Venetian era, via first the walled city of Rethymno and then Chania, an ancient settlement best known now for its exquisite 14th-century harbour and lighthouse. It was the ideal final destination. We walked through its little streets, savouring the architecture, including the tiny former mosque that is now an office for the port authority.

We were staying a 20-minute walk along the coast from the old centre. This time we were very much in stylish contemporary Crete. The Domes Zeen resort has 101 luxurious cabins built into the hillside looking over the beach. Exotic fruit trees and plants, including bananas, oranges and bird of paradise, line the walkways. On our last morning, before our final epic Greek breakfast, we threaded our way down to the beach and plunged into the sea. We had the waves to ourselves — and as we swam to shore, there on the skyline was the timeless backdrop of a snow-capped mountain.

Details

Alec Russell was a guest of *Original Travel*, which offers an eight-night trip like the one described from £3,850 per person including return flights from London, car hire and private, guided tours throughout

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